

**ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE**

A method for reducing defect levels in a photomask by employing a cleaning process which does not degrade the photomask after multiple cycles of cleaning. The method is suitable for patterned metal stencil photomasks and phase shift photomasks. The method employs an alkaline aqueous cleaning solution for a particular time in a particular temperature range. The method results in improved photomask yield after multiple cleaning cycles.

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